

The face of new AFRICA

“RAIN!” laughs a gleeful Montauga, beaming, bubbling, pointing at a heavy sky. “Look! Rain! This is the first time I’ve ever known it rain after October 15 – the farmers will be so happy!”

He launches into the mysterious strains of an African rain song – but he doesn’t need to: the great rain gods are already busy; the junior gods of tourism are skulking on the sidelines.

Even as a holidaymaker who packed sun-block not umbrellas, you can’t help but share Africa’s delight, though the bumpy, muddy roads melt into seas, which our bus sails like a ship in a storm. The animals are pleased, too: the long-billed pelicans in the ancient baobab trees; the bright yellow blobs of the nest-proud weaver birds; the black and white egrets, like chess pieces on a board with a chequered history.

For five long years – from ’68 to ’73 – the rains didn’t come in Senegal, and the animals left in a reverse Noah’s-Ark procession – two by two, three by three, herd by sad herd. “The elephants, the lions, they used to come to our villages when I was young. We were frightened – especially of the hyenas,” says Montauga, our Senegalese guide.

Three decades later, these once-proud rulers of the African plains are slowly returning – brought back by the Government to the Bandia Nature Reserve just outside Saly, a small but thriving town on the coast. We bump along through the bush in an open jeep, stopping to gaze at playful zebra, at furious-looking ostrich, elegant antelope, and leggy giraffe who, seemingly oblivious to our presence, munch high leaves a bare few metres from us.

Every now and then, our guide orders the jeep to stop and mysteriously examines the dusty ground; disappears for minutes at a time until, returning with an air of contained excitement, urgently gestures to us to get out and follow him. We push through the hot undergrowth, feeling like pioneers, brushing back strange, tall plants with tenaciously clinging sticky buds until, in a clearing just feet from us, there he is: a white rhino, lazily sunning his huge bulk in

Katie Jarvis falls in love with a country that, through all its hardships, can create joy from nothing



Above: The bumpy ride through the Bandia Nature Reserve.

the already-pulsing morning heat, too lazy to attack but a formidable presence none-the-less.

This is a country to fall in love with; a strange country that bamboozles you with sensory overload. As we crawl along the traffic-choked roads from the airport in Dakar to our hotel on the coast (two million of the country’s 12 million people are squeezed into the bursting-at-the-seams capital), we pass refugees at the roadsides selling everything from newspapers and table lamps to juicy, sticky tropical fruit. People hang out of crowded trucks; there are tents by the side of the road, grass huts amongst the concrete buildings; fantastic plants bloom – spiky, orange, green fern, brown palm; crashed overloaded lorries spill their haul of peanuts; rusty abandoned vehicles nestle, unembarrassed, next to Land Rover garages with spanking new models for sale. Kids without shoes in the dust; skinny animals scrabbling for grass in the mud; sheep on top of buses: “You get wet when the sheep makes ‘pipi’,” Montauga says.

And everywhere, the sun beats down,

relieved by a breeze that sends yet more dust scuttling along the roads.

Like much of Africa, Senegal is a country of extremes. We stay in hotels of unparalleled luxury, such as the glorious Le Royal Lodge, where the swimming pools merge with deserted sandy beaches – dotted with deep crab holes – the gentle waves of the Atlantic breaking the silence. Riches indeed. Yet another day, we stop at a traditional African village, full of thatched huts, where the inhabitants gather together every evening to share their meal and talk over the day spent in the fields. Another kind of riches. We have gifts for them: school exercise books, pencils and a huge bag of rice bought from a traditional market on the way. But we also give them Tesco bubble mix from England: And never has 25p bought more happiness. We show the children how, with gentle breath, a thin film of soap can be expanded into a huge, perfect, round bubble that floats on nothing but air. It’s a beautiful visual irony; Africa is the expert at creating joy from nothing.

There’s hardship, it’s true – the welcome rains bequeath not only crops but standing water where mosquitoes gather: malaria – so preventable – is a big killer. But the Republic of Senegal knows success, too. Its democratic culture has brought stability; President Abdoulaye Wade has been in power for nearly 10 years, following elections declared free and fair by international observers.

Africa’s most westerly state, bounded by the Atlantic to the west, Senegal shares borders with Mauritania, Mali, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau; while The Gambia lies almost entirely cocooned within it. Francophiles will love it – the main language is French (though many locals do speak English; it’s taught in schools) – and French holidaymakers abound. You might have to pinch yourself when, after miles of rundown, bare concrete buildings, a gleaming chic boulangerie suddenly appears. Inevitably, the French connection (Senegal achieved independence in 1960) means much of the cuisine is outstanding.

The glorious infinity pool at Le Royal Lodge.



But it has to be said, its history of European trading brings little credit to any: Portugal, the Netherlands, Great Britain and France competed here for centuries. Indeed, as a final homage to this alien, wonderful, mesmerising country, we tourists visit the Ile de Gorée. We leave Dakar by luxury powerboat, eating pastries and *religiuses* as we bounce along the waves. But the sweet delicacies stick in our throats as we approach the shores of this breathtaking island, with its colonial-style buildings and pink bougainvillea.

For here, in the cheerfully bright yellow, red and green houses, millions of men, women and children were held before being shipped out as slaves. Children as young as six (younger ones were killed), packed into a room smaller than many household kitchens; men shackled together in bleak, bare cells. Young virgins had the best accommodation – they were granted a drainage channel for sewage – because they brought a good price: worth the same as a barrel of rum.

“There’s the punishment cell,” explains the rotund curator, pointing to what amounts to a hole in the wall. “How many were in there? No idea. They stopped when they couldn’t force the door closed.”

How many died? Suffice to say that, in

the 17th century, the populations of China and Africa were similar. Now, China has twice as many people.

As we look round these bleak, empty cells, the sun shining down, the flowers blooming, and the waves lapping at the island’s shores, there are simply no words.

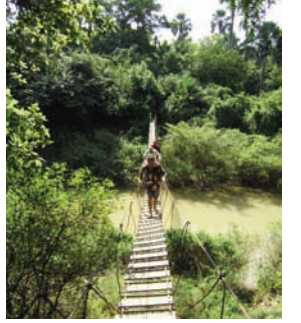
Except that the African curator has something to say. “This house is now a centre for democracy and human rights: it’s a place where different parts of the world can celebrate and reconcile.”

To reconcile and reflect. Condemning the past is too easy. Would I have kept slaves, 300 years ago? What do I do now that, in a hundred years’ time, will be considered morally abhorrent? Those are the harder questions. Those are the answers those long-dead Africans deserve...

“The ferry back to the mainland is here,” says Montauga. “Time to go!” This polymath, who speaks five languages, grew up in one of Africa’s grass-hut villages. He is proud of his emerging country, with its beautiful wildlife, its amazing geography, its vast ocean; its newly-built tourism industry.

Montauga is the face of new Africa. ■

Katie Jarvis travelled to Senegal with The Senegal Experience: www.senegal.co.uk



Tour Operator

The Senegal Experience offers flights with Brussels Airlines from Birmingham, Manchester and Gatwick: 0845 338 8706; www.senegal.co.uk

Accommodation

Katie Jarvis stayed at: Lamantin Beach Hotel (5*) in Saly; Hotel Espadon (4*) in Saly; Le Royal Lodge (5*) in the Sine Saloum region

Excursions

A wide variety of excursions are offered, including Gorée Island and Dakar; Bandia Reserve Mini-Safari; the bush and villages by quad bike; bird-watching by pirogue; and fishing in the Sine Saloum Delta

Sample package

Prices start from £699 per person, based on seven nights half-board accommodation at Hotel Royam (3 ½ grade) in Saly, including return flights from Birmingham, Manchester or Gatwick to Dakar (via Brussels), transfers and taxes.